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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 000690

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SUBJECT: THIRD TERM DEFEAT TRIGGERS EUPHORIA AMONG SOUTHERN POLITICOS

REF: ABUJA 1149

Classified By: Consul General Brian L. Browne for Reason 1.4 (D).

SUMMARY

1. (C) The demise of the third term amendment has most southern politicians happier than they have been in months. Many believe the President will not easily accept defeat and will search for another device to extend his presidency. Cynics believe he will foment or encourage unrest, particularly in the Niger Delta, in order to create a state of emergency where elections are impossible and thus tenure extension is warranted. His staunch critics warn the only way to ensure Obasanjo behaves responsibly is to keep him on the defensive -- by starting impeachment proceedings against him for attempting to bribe his way into a third term. End summary.

ELEVENTH HOUR MANEUVERS FAIL TO KEEP TERM EXTENSION ALIVE

2. (C) Most southern politicians and many prominent businesspeople were ebullient when the National Assembly shelved the proposed third term constitutional amendment. However, most politicians tempered their euphoria with the sober recognition that this issue, for now dead, could be resurrected.

3. (C) Lagos State sources report President Obasanjo was actively canvassing for help as late as Sunday. Showing a sense of desperation, he even stooped to soliciting aid from an unlikely source, his Yoruba political arch-enemy Lagos Governor Tinubu. On Sunday, Obasanjo summoned Tinubu to a one-on-one. The usually rough-edged President was at his friendliest in attempting to coax Tinubu his way. Obasanjo appealed to Tinubu to exercise ethnic solidarity and pressed the Lagos executive to back a "compromise" wherein Obasanjo's and the state governors' current terms would be extended by two years, thereby obviating elections in 2007. Tinubu refused to bite the Obasanjo lure, according to a Tinubu aide. Tinubu saw Obasanjo's request for a two-year extension as an attempt to sneak in through the back door what was denied through the front. A two-year extension would simply move the third term debate from 2006 to 2008, Tinubu felt.

4. (C) Noted economist and Lagos Business School Dean Pat Utomi recounted a conversation with Nasir El-Rufai, Minister of the Federal Capital Territory, who said members of the Presidents economic team warned the President not to let the third term amendment go to a decisive vote in the Assembly. However, Obasanjo's political hacks prevailed. El-Rufai feared the defeat would now make the President the lamest of ducks, and may make it difficult to govern for the remaining period of this term, particularly should officials start to abandon the President in droves.

THE PRESIDENT IS DOWN, BUT NONE SAY HE IS OUT...YET

5. (C) While El-Rufai feared the President might suffer a mortal political wound, many southern politicians still felt Obasanjo had enough political ammunition and personal gumption to revisit tenure extension, either by reviving debate in the National Assembly, perhaps after engineering the removal of some key members who opposed this initial attempt, or perhaps by simply waiting for violence in the Delta to erupt, providing justification for a state of emergency which would "compel" him to stay in office and postpone elections. For the time being, most observers thought he would act conciliatory, in order to break the unity his political opponents forged against the third term campaign. These observers think Obasanjo's talk of reconciliation is not heartfelt but just a tactical retreat

to keep the heat off him and give him time to seek another opening to press his objective.

16. (C) Differing opinions emerged regarding how to encourage the President to shelve any future moves to extend his tenure. Some have discussed engineering a graceful exit by offering him a special position for African peacekeeping under the joint auspices of the UN and AU, or perhaps a professorial chair at a university (reftel). Others favor a more aggressive approach to contain Obasanjo, such as a motion of impeachment or various offenses, including the bribery and coercion of assemblymen during the third term debate. (The impeachment option was raised by an attorney who is a close associate of Usman Bugaji, Vice President Atiku's most trusted ally in the National Assembly.)

17. (C) Even if he does not succeed in extending his stay in office, Obasanjo would still have control of the PDP. Observers believed the President would use his position in the party to actively block Atiku from the nomination.

COMMENT

18. (C) The reactions communicated to us following the third term defeat indicate that most southerners, even in Obasanjo's Yoruba homeland, opposed the third term and the political temperature has eased somewhat. There were actual reports of small public celebrations in some southern cities. Ironically, Obasanjo's third term setback makes the future more uncertain than if the obverse had occurred. The jockeying for position has already intensified, not only at the Presidential level but for state governorships as well. While everyone is now looking to their political future, the most prudent, astute practitioners will also keep an eye on Obasanjo. End comment.
BROWNE